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04 LESSONS LEARNED AND
EMERGING BEST PRACTICE

4.2 Sierra Leone

Embedding Safe and Dignified Programming

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Sierra Leone: Embedding Safe and Dignified Programming

In 2019, Sierra Leone declared an emergency due to rape and sexual assault and a national strategy was developed in response.[1] However, this strategy has minimal focus on the increased risks during a time of crisis or displacement. Rapid population growth in Freetown has forced vulnerable and low-income communities to settle in high-risk areas such as low-lying coastal locations, river channels and deforested upper catchment areas.[2] In the informal settlements of Cockle Bay and Kolleh Town, women and girls face high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including sexual exploitation, abuse, and intimate partner violence. Experience from across the humanitarian sector tells us that existing protection risks, particularly forms of SGBV, increase during emergencies because of the increased stress and uncertainty.

The Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs   recognized the need for capacity strengthening on safe and dignified programming. They expressed a desire to create and strengthen linkages with District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs) and the Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs) to support them on safe and dignified programming.

Local government structures as entry points for safe and dignified programming

As part of the USAID/BHA-funded project *Preparing to Enhance Protection in Disasters* (PrEPD), staff in Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) Sierra Leone country program identified the CDMCs in Cockle Bay and Kolleh Town as key stakeholders. The CDMCs are made up of volunteer community members. They were invited to participate in capacity strengthening activities aimed at embedding safe and dignified programming in disaster risk reduction and management planning.

CRS began by engaging with existing government and non-governmental structures that were key in setting up the CDMCs. This included the **Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA), the** Federation of Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP), Freetown City Council (FCC), and the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA). To build relationships, and capacities, CRS employed the following approaches:

- Capacity assessment and improvement plan
- Sharing tools and conducting Training of Trainer (ToT) events so that government, DRR and humanitarian staff could co-facilitate sessions on safe and dignified programming
- Including government, DRR and humanitarian staff in the PrEPD project's monthly planning and coordination meetings
- Supporting NDMA to strengthen coordination mechanisms with the CDMCs
- Supporting the FCC through the Tony Blair Institute (TBI) to develop a concept note and budget for additional CDMC activities

Intentional collaboration with these local and central government structures set the stage for effective engagement with CDMCs. This is because in the context of Sierra Leone, disaster risk reduction requires strategic policies and joint interventions to achieve success. Follow-up activities with CDMCs included community consultations on protection gaps and risks. They also consulted diverse groups about their communication preferences for feedback

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1 Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs. (2020). National Male Engagement Strategy for the Prevention of SGBV in Sierra Leone, Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs,

2 World Bank. (2018). Sierra Leone Multi-City Hazard Review and Risk Assessment Final Report (Volume 2 of 5): Freetown City Hazard and Risk Assessment.

mechanisms. They also jointly developed referral pathways using the Developing Referral Pathways for Essential Protection Services Tool.

This was a new approach for the CRS team as their focus was on existing government and community structures as opposed to local NGOs that usually serve as CRS on-the-ground implementers.

Lessons for working with local government structures

- **Focus on strengths, not just gaps.** The project team found that starting with a capacity assessment was an effective approach to engaging local government bodies. Gaps identified included a lack of structured leadership on safe and dignified programming, clear terms of reference (ToR), and concrete guiding principles. These findings were discussed and resulted in a meaningful improvement plan. At the same time, the capacity assessment highlighted two key strengths that were critical to the project: in-depth knowledge of the local context and relationships with existing community structures.

- **Prioritize community consultations.** Community consultations are critical for developing tools and interventions that are relevant to communities' needs. It is through these consultations that the project team and local structures with which they partnered were able to identify the unique needs of the vulnerable groups, who had previously been excluded from disaster risk reduction and management activities. The CLDRM+ provided tools and templates for this purpose that proved highly effective in this context.

- **Strengthening existing community structures is an effective approach.** DRR and humanitarian actors sometimes fail to engage existing community structures because they are perceived to lack capacity. In some cases, they even opt to set up new structures that at best duplicate existing structures and at worst undermine them. This persists even though it is often these community structures that are the first responders during disaster events. As a result, community members may not be involved in decisions that affect them. By strengthening the capacities of existing groups, community members who know their contexts, strengths, and needs can serve as strong and capable leaders in times of crisis. All disaster risk reduction and management programs should engage and strengthen existing community structures.

- **Include community structures in training on safe and dignified programming.** Although the content of safe and dignified trainings can be both heavy and taboo in some contexts, it is critical not to shy away for delivering these trainings to those closest to – or even coming from – affected populations. Having an in-depth understanding of the concepts underpinning safe and dignified programming, helps community structures to identify protection risks and mitigating measures.

- **Enhancing coordination between groups is critical to achieving results.** Community structures noted difficulty in producing results when working in isolation. After strengthening the linkages between CDMCs and existing local DRRM actors – and strengthening the capacity of both – project staff observed notable results. CODOHSAPA/FERDUP had an in-depth understanding of the local context as well as relationships with CDMCs. Together, they were able to strengthen communities' trust in disaster preparedness and response strategies. Further, the project team expects the results of the project to be more sustainable. Local actors, who will outlast the project, are now equipped with the knowledge, skills, and infrastructure to respond to disasters.